



1930 Ninth Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
406-457-8900  
[publichealth@lccountymt.gov](mailto:publichealth@lccountymt.gov)  
[www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org](http://www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org)

## **For IR Public Health Column**

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**Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-457-8910**

**Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908, 406-439-4503 (cell)**

# **Ending Underage Drinking Is Everyone's Job**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
County Health Officer**

Graduation is a rite of passage steeped in tradition. Unfortunately, in Montana that often includes the overconsumption of alcohol by underage youth – and the tragic accidents that too often follow. Many of us have been touched by this issue, directly or indirectly.

Underage drinking is not only illegal, it's a persistent threat to public health. Alcohol is the most commonly abused drug among youth; it beats out tobacco and illegal drugs. It's responsible for more than 4,300 deaths a year among Americans under 21, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Because the brains of adolescents are still developing, alcohol can cause serious and long-lasting harm, including social, emotional, and behavioral problems. It can lead to alcoholism later in life. But underage drinkers don't just hurt themselves. They harm other people, too, especially when they get behind the wheel.

## **How Big Is the Problem?**

About 45 percent of teenagers in the nation drink alcohol, the CDC reports. Most start between the ages of 10 and 13.

Studies have shown that teens drink less often than adults, but when they do drink, they drink more. About 90 percent of underage drinking involves binge drinking, which is defined as five or more drinks in a row for males and four for females. That's exactly the kind of drinking that's most likely to go on at "senior keggers" and other teen parties.

Here in Lewis and Clark County, more than a third of high school students (36 percent) confessed to drinking alcohol during the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted through the schools. Nineteen percent said they binge drink, and 13 percent said they drink and drive.

Since teens can't legally get alcohol on their own, that use is usually made possible by adults.

That's why the city of Helena has a "social host" ordinance that prohibits anyone from allowing a person under 21 to have alcoholic beverages at a gathering on the host's premises. In other words,

parents who allow their teens to have alcohol at parties in their homes are committing a misdemeanor and may be fined up to \$500 per violation.

### **What's the Harm?**

When young people try alcohol, they often don't realize the harm it can cause not only to themselves, but to their families and communities.

The risks of underage drinking are sobering. They include:

- **Death.** This can occur directly, from alcohol poisoning, or indirectly from poor judgment and reflexes that result in car crashes, murders, suicides, and injuries like falls and drowning.
- **Serious injury.** In 2010, there were about 189,000 visits by youth to emergency rooms for injuries and other conditions related to alcohol.
- **Impaired judgment.** Drinking can influence kids to make poor decisions. That can result in risky behaviors like drinking and driving, sexual activity, stealing, and fighting. Young people who drink are more likely to be the perpetrator or the victim of physical or sexual assault.
- **Brain development problems.** Brain development begins in the womb and lasts into the mid-20s. Research shows that binge drinking in adolescence can cause lasting harm to parts of the brain related to learning, memory, impulse control, and decision-making.
- **Poor school performance.** Drinking disrupts sleep patterns, which can make it harder to stay awake and concentrate during the day. Underage drinkers are more likely to have bad grades and drop out of school.
- **Run-ins with the law.** Poor judgment can prompt teens to do things that are against the law, like drinking and driving, vandalism, and committing violence against others.

Drinking isn't something that teenagers simply grow out of. One study found that youth who start drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to abuse alcohol later in life than those who wait until they're 21. So clearly it's important to delay the use of alcohol among teens for the benefit of their current and long-term health.

### **What Can We Do?**

Youth mostly develop their attitudes and behavior regarding alcohol based on what they see and hear about it in their homes and communities.

Though some influences may be outside their control, parents can make a huge impact by staying involved in their teens' lives and setting clear limits. A lot of great resources are available at [www.parentpower.mt.gov](http://www.parentpower.mt.gov).

But society as a whole also has a responsibility. We need to stop sending young people mixed messages about alcohol use – as in ads that portray drinking as sexy and glamorous. Instead, we need to create a safe and healthy environment that encourages teens to feel good about themselves without drinking.

One way to do that is to adopt strategies and policies that make the healthy choice the easy choice. Some measures we can consider are:

- Diligently enforcing existing laws intended to curb underage drinking;
- Making alcohol harder to get by raising the price and reducing the number of places where it's sold;
- Holding adults accountable when they give alcohol to minors;
- Restricting alcohol advertising and product placement;
- Creating friendly, alcohol-free places for teens to gather, including adult-supervised extracurricular activities after school;
- Restricting public drinking in places where young people are likely to be present;
- Supporting programs that helps teens who've already started drinking; and
- Encouraging teens to ask for help if they drink alcohol.

Changing our culture of drinking is a tall order. But we must help young people understand that it's not okay for them to use alcohol. We need to stop enabling this threat to public health and start discouraging it. It will take an effort by all of us to make that happen.

For more information, check out the "U.S. Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking." It's online at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44360/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44360/)